

# **LUKE**

## Part 55: “The Narrow Door”

Luke 13:22-30

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Sunday, March 17, 2019 (The Second Sunday of Lent)

### **Scripture Reading**

<sup>22</sup> He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. <sup>23</sup> And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, <sup>24</sup> “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup> When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ <sup>26</sup> Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ <sup>27</sup> But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ <sup>28</sup> In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out. <sup>29</sup> And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup> And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”<sup>1</sup>

*Almighty and Everlasting God, as we open your Holy Word today, may your Spirit give us eyes to see your kingdom anew. Teach us how to go through the narrow door that leads to life. We pray this is Jesus’s mighty name. AMEN.*

### **Introduction**

- In the Holy Land, there is an ancient city surrounded by cement walls. Inside the city, there is an ancient church. The entrance into this church is a small, stone door (show **Image 1 “Door of Humility”**) that is barely big enough for an adult to walk through. Even if you were on your knees, you would still have to lower your head, just to walk through it.
- You would never go into this door by accident. You literally have to bend down to come in. But once you go through this door, you would find yourself inside the oldest church building in the world – “The Church of the Nativity” (show **Image 2 “Church of the Nativity interior”**). It is a church that was first built in the 300s on the site where tradition says Jesus was born.
- I had the privilege of visiting this church about, and the thing I remember most about this place is the door. You would never build a door like this for a church

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 13:22–30.

today. It's cumbersome. It's inaccessible. It would violate pretty much any modern building code in any city. Nevertheless, there is a reason the door is as short and narrow as it is. The door is called the "Door of Humility." *No matter who you are, you have to take upon a humble posture to come inside this holy site.*

- So too with the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, there is no VIP list. You cannot earn your way into this kingdom. You cannot demand your way into this kingdom because of your social class or pedigree. And unlike many American universities apparently, you can't bribe your way into the kingdom. There is only one way into this kingdom, and it is a narrow door. And today's passage will explore what that narrow door is.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) A Question.**

- As Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem, a man from the crowd asked Jesus a question about salvation.
- We find that question in verse 23: *"Lord, will those who are saved be few?"*
- It is a question of quantity.
  
- But where is this question coming from, we might ask?
- I tend to think whoever is asking this question has been paying very close attention to the teaching of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>
- Jesus's teaching has been challenging the traditional understanding of everything
- Specifically, he has been subverting the theology of the Pharisees.
- Jesus has just redefined the kingdom.
- The kingdom is not a cataclysmic military or political event, but rather the reign of God which starts small and humbly, but will one day renew all creation.
  
- If the Pharisees were wrong about the nature of the kingdom of God, could they also be wrong about who will be part of the kingdom of God?
- This is actually a very thoughtful question.
- The Pharisees taught a theology of cultural exceptionalism when it came to salvation.
- They presumed that all Jews (except for the very worst) would be saved by virtue of their bloodlines and that all Gentiles (except for the extraordinary ones) would be condemned.<sup>3</sup>
- In the teaching that is to follow Jesus will show how that this is an utterly wrong view of salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 172.

<sup>3</sup> "In *Sanhedrin* 10:1 it is stated that 'all Israelites have a share in the world to come.' Jesus' audience sensed that his teaching was quite different." Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 379.

- But for our sake, we might ask, what motivates a theology like this?
- Beneath this theology, there is this desire to be special, to be exclusive, to be better than, to be able to say we are part of the in-crowd.
- If you want to put it bluntly, the Pharisees' theology of salvation was *man-centered*.
- This is an important point to note because we can still be drawn to false versions of the gospel that are man-centered instead of God-centered.
- Today, we can be just as drawn to theologies that make much of us instead of making much of God.
- Please be on the lookout. Many "Christian" books and "Christian" pastors are selling a version of Christianity that is about the greatness of you instead of the greatness of God.
- The Christian gospel is not the power of positive thinking with a little Jesus sprinkled on top that would magically absolve you from the experience of suffering.
- The Christian gospel is not a message costs nothing and demands nothing of you.
- The Christian gospel is not about your best life now, but about your best life in eternity.
- The Christian gospel tells us that outside of Christ we are dead in our sin, but that God being rich in mercy has invited us to embrace the life that is in Christ alone. We are offered a salvation by grace alone, which transforms us for a whole new way of life. This message is a message of hope. But it is a message that challenges us just as much as it comforts us.
- One of the distinctive core values of Redeemer is that we want to be a church that is centered on Jesus Christ.
- It is really easy to do church in America in such a way that makes it all about you. But we want to be a people that are all about Jesus. We want to declare Jesus with our words and display Jesus with our lives.
- You will see this value in our pulpit, our generational ministries, our worship ministry, and in all that we do.

## **2.) The Surprising Answer.**

- Jesus doesn't answer the question that was asked. He responds to the question that should have been asked.
- In effect, he says let's not talk about who God is going to save; let's talk about why *you* need to be saved.
- He says in verse 24: "*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able*" (Luke 13:24, ESV).
- There is one door of salvation, one door to the kingdom of God. You will not go through this door on accident.
- This door demands more than casual interest. To go through this door will that a

disciple embrace the way of the cross. It will require suffering. It will require you to “strive.” The word for “strive” in verse 24 is translated from the Greek word “*agōnizomai*” (ἀγωνίζομαι<sup>4</sup>), from which English gets the word “agonize.”

- How should we make sense of this?
- Well, first off, we need to identify the nature of this narrow door. Is the narrow door trying really, really hard to be a good person? Is the narrow door something that is only available to super-Christians who perform some epic task for God? No, not at all.
- The entire point of this gospel account is to show us that the narrow door is Jesus himself.
- As Jesus will later say in the Gospel of John, “*Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, ESV).*”
- In theology, we call this the doctrine of the exclusivity of Christ. This is the Christian belief that trusting in Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation.
  
- Now before we go further, I think it is important to note that this doctrine is considered by many on the inside and outside of the church to be one of the more offensive and contested doctrines of biblical Christianity.<sup>5</sup>
- Isn’t this truth claim that is inherently exclusive and arrogant?
- Many people who would say we need to believe that all religions are fundamentally the same and equally valid.
- But no sincere practitioner of any religion would find that sentiment noble.
- That idea is just the preferred pipedream of people who are not religious.
- It is actually a fairly prideful view that assumes the non-religious person is the only person enlightened enough to see the whole truth (e.g. “the parable of the elephant retold”).
- The truth is all worldviews make exclusive truth-claims.
- The Christian gospel makes an exclusive truth claim that, if you truly grasp it, will humble you to your core.
  
- But there is a sense in which Christianity goes out of its way to distinguish itself from other world religions.
- Most religions are about what man can do to get to God (e.g., the eight-fold path to nirvana, the five pillars of Islam).
- But the gospel of Jesus is about what God has done to get to man.
  
- The gospel at its core forces us to acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves through our moral efforts or good intentions.

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<sup>4</sup> “to fight, struggle.” William Arndt et al., [\*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature\*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Much of the following argument is indebted to the first chapter of Timothy Keller. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008.

- And like entering into the door of humility at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, great humility is required to accept this good news.
- You have to trust in the saving work of Jesus, and let his work transform you from the inside out.
- Sometimes it can be *agonizing* work to remind ourselves daily of the truth of this gospel. But only this gospel will save.

### 3.) A New Vision for the Kingdom of God

- As Jesus continues his response, he shows that the kingdom of God is going to fly right in the face of human expectations.<sup>6</sup>
- Jesus compares himself to a master of a house who has opened a door to his house, but who will soon shut that door (Lk. 13:25). There will be many who expect to get in because they ate with him occasionally and listened to his sermons (Lk. 13:26). But Jesus will tell them to depart because he doesn't know where they are from (Lk. 13:25,27).
- He then compares the kingdom of heaven to a great banquet and feast. However, there will be some ethnically Jewish people will be on the outside looking in, where they will see their ancestors and heroes like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the Old Testament prophets (Lk. 13:28). And to their utter astonishment, there will be people from Gentile nations who have come from the north, south, east, and west to enjoy the feast in the kingdom of God (Lk. 13:29).
- And he concludes this teaching with the famous words: "*And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last*" (Luke 13:30, ESV).
- There will be some people who you think would be in the kingdom of God that aren't.
- There will be some people who you would never think would be in the kingdom of God that will be there.
- And you can see how this cuts at the Pharisees theology of salvation that we talked about earlier. Remember, their theology was ethnocentric. That is, it was all about the superiority of their race and culture.
- Israel wanted God to save and exalt them, and bring judgment and destruction upon the Gentile nations.
- But God's plan for redemption was always global (cf. Gen 12:2-3). You can imagine why this would strike a meaningful chord with the author Luke, who is a gentile Christian (cf. Col. 4:14).<sup>7</sup>
- Israel wanted a kingdom that would defeat all the nations.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 563.

<sup>7</sup> "The parallels in Matthew and Mark indicate that Jesus used this proverb primarily to signify the admission of Israel's outcasts (tax collectors, sinners, the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind) and the exclusion of the religious elite (Pharisees, scribes, lawyers, priests). Luke and his readers, however, also would have understood this in terms of Acts 13:46; 18:6; and 28:28, i.e., the unbelief of much of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles." Stein. 380.

- Jesus would bring a kingdom that would save the nations.<sup>8</sup>
- This is an invitation to everyone who feels like they are unworthy of God.
- When you humble yourself to trust in Jesus, you are grafted into the very people of God. There are no varsity and junior varsity Christians. In heaven, there are no Jews-only and Gentiles-only sections. In heaven, there is no distinction between those who grew up in church and those who didn't, those who came from good homes and those who didn't, those who looked like they had it all together and those who didn't.
- In heaven, there are only those who say, "I am only here by the grace of Jesus!"
- But there is also a sense of *urgency* in this text. The narrow door will not be open forever. And familiarity with Jesus does not mean the same thing as a relationship with Jesus.
- During his ministry, there have been Pharisees have shared meals with Jesus, not to build a relationship with him, but to evaluate him. They will listen to his sermons, not to learn, but to critique him. Such people will not be in the kingdom.
- For us today, we must humbly recognize, there is a significant difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus. There is a significant difference between being a part of the people of God and attending church occasionally. There is a significant difference between being devoted to Jesus and giving your saying you believe in certain doctrines about Jesus.
- The difference may not be apparent now. But one day that difference will be made known.
- The reason this for this teaching is to provoke us to self-assess where we stand in our relationship with God. Whatever else we have going on, this is the most crucial issue at hand. Our ultimate destiny is determined by whether or not Jesus will say on the final day, "I know you."<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

- The Church of the Nativity is believed to be the place where many people believe God entered into human history.
- This Creator King came, not with pomp and circumstance, but with humility and poverty.
- For this reason, I love the imagery of the "Door of Humility." Even emperors and kings must humbly bow before this truth.

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<sup>8</sup> "Every promise made to Israel now belongs equally to every believer who has been grafted into Christ." O. Palmer Robertson. *The Christ of the Prophets*. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004, 2008), 339.

<sup>9</sup> Stein. 381.

- At the nativity, we are reminded that when God comes into the world, he doesn't come for the high and important. He comes for the outcast, the dirty, and the broken,
- Lowly shepherds and magi from Gentile nations come to worship a king who came not with pride but with humility, a king who would conquer by the cross, a king whose kingdom would save the nations and invite them into an eternal feast.
- As the prophet Isaiah writes: *"On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken"* (Isaiah 25:6–8, ESV).
- May we embrace the narrow door and enter into this feast. AMEN.

### **Community Group Discussion Starters**

1. Read Luke 13:22-30. How would you summarize these verses in your own words?
2. As Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem, a man asked him "Will those who are saved be few?" (Lk. 13:23). This question arose from a popular understanding of salvation that believed most Jewish people would be saved strictly on the basis of their race. Can you think of unbiblical views about salvation that are popular today?
3. Jesus teaches that those who wish to be saved must "strive to enter through the narrow door" (Lk. 13:24). What is this "narrow door" of salvation? What does it mean to "strive" to enter through this door?
4. Jesus seems to suggest in this passage that people will be surprised at who will be saved and who will not be saved. All throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus has shown that he saves the unlikely and the unworthy. Why is this truth such good news for us today?
5. How should we seek to apply Jesus's teaching in this passage to our lives today?

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